

قراءة جديدة في نظرية طه حسين عن الثقافة

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قدّم طه حسين نظرية شاملة للثقافة في كتابه "مستقبل الثقافة في مصر" (١٩٣٦)، إثر انتفاء آخر أثر للاحتلال البريطاني لمصر من الناحية القانونية، وذلك بإلغاء الامتيازات الأجنبية في معاهدة مُنترو. وركّز نظريته تلك على أهمية الثقافة القومية في دعم استقلال الوطن. ولقد انشغل النقاد بتلك النظرية فمنهم من رفضها بحجة أنها احتوت على قدر ما من "التغريب" أخرج مصر عن انتمائها العربي والإسلامي، ومنهم من تحمّس لها ورخّب بها بوصفها مدخلا للتحديث، ومنهم أيضاً من تحفّظ على بعض ما جاء بها من أفكار وتقبّل على مضض بعضها الآخر.

ويستهدف البحث الحالي تقديم قراءة جديدة في نظرية طه حسين عن الثقافة على ضوء اتجاه نقد ما بعد الاستعمار، وبخاصة ما جاء به إدوارد سعيد وهومي بابا من نظريات تناولت إشكالية العلاقات بين المُستعمر والمُستعمر، فشخصت الداء فيما تأسس من ثنائيات أنتجها الفكر الاستعماري، وما أعقب ذلك من نمو الشعور القومي، وتشابك العلاقات بين طرفي المعادلة في تداخل تشابكت فيه الرؤى وغاب عنه التحديد الفاصل بين ثقافة الطرفين. ويخلص البحث إلى وقوع طه حسين تحت تأثير ثنائية التقابل التي رُوّج لها الفكر الاستعماري، الأمر الذي دعاه لإلحاق مصر بالثقافة الغربية والتبرير لذلك، غير أن ذلك لم يخلّ بينه وبين إثبات هوية مصر العربية والإسلامية فيما تضمّنه برنامج الثقافة من تفاصيل، متخطياً بذلك سلبيات "التغريب" وموازراً لمولد حركة حديثة تعتمد على الأصالة الثقافية الخاصة بمصر تدعمها مناهج الفكر الغربي في عصره.

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NOTES

1. All translated quotes from *Mustaqbal* are from Sidney Glazer's translation published by the American Council of Learned Societies: Taha Hussein. *The Future of Culture in Egypt*. Near Eastern Translation Program, Number 9. Trans. By Sidney Glazer. Washington, D.C.: ACLS, 1954.
2. D. S. Margoliouth, a British Orientalist, expressed doubt as to the authenticity of much pre-Islamic poetry in a paper published in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1925 II, one year before Taha Husayn produced his *Fi Al-Shi'r Al-Jahili* adopting the same view. Husayn's detractors accused him of plagiarism and, worse still, of following in the footsteps of Orientalists. Margoliouth himself, however, wrote a notice about Husayn's modified version, where he stated that the thesis *Fi al-Adab al-Jahili* in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, October, 1927, pp. 902-4 of the earlier version of the book "is very nearly identical with that of the reviewer's paper "On the origin of Arabic poetry", which appeared about the same time in this *Journal*, the writers having arrived independently at similar results".

draw links between the present and the future of their nation and those of the human race .

It is such a flexible view of culture that encourages Husayn to adopt a humanist view of culture that extends from ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, the Arabs to the Europe of his time. He stands by his view that the human mind is constantly evolving and accepts the notion of hybridity in culture, all the while maintaining certain fundamental aspects that characterize the Egyptian "native identity". It is to be noted as well that in spite of Husayn's implicit acceptance of the binary division propagated by colonialism and inadvertently supported by traditionalists (west/east; advanced/backward; materialist/spiritual), he manages to successfully subvert it producing in its stead a new theory of culture that challenged both discourses.

between tradition and the requirements of a fast growing and changing world. Education is presented as a prerequisite of a democratic society (22 ff.). A call for state supervision of all educational facilities, including Al-Azhar institutions as well as foreign schools, is sounded in the interest of a unified national character. Arabic, religion, national history and geography curricula are the cornerstone of a typical Egyptian education (29). A chapter is devoted to the teaching of religion to Egyptian Christians (Copts) (38-140). Detailed discussion of the educational process focuses consecutively on school buildings, curricula, teachers and students. Husayn accords special attention to developing a modern approach to teaching the Arabic language, especially Arabic grammar. As for higher education, he draws a plan for a university that encourages research as well as prepares students to a lead professional career. Finally Husayn puts forward his vision of an intellectual life that is based on a delicate balance between opening up to western influences and an enlightened censorship of undesirable cultural phenomena that may not be in accord with our tradition. Taha Husayn does not see culture in isolation. There is mutual exchange between cultures in his educational programme. History courses, for example, help students to make the connection between the past of the nation and the past of humanity at large, and leads them to

association with this same philosophy fails to make it a prop to the Muslim mind? (8)

Husayn attributes the temporary lapse in Egypt's culture and civilization to the Ottoman invasion, and in another interesting parallel, compares it to the fall of the Roman world at the hands of the barbarians (9-10). In both cases, Husayn finds, the cultural heritage came to itself when relations were resumed across the Mediterranean: 'Europe's Renaissance was inspired by the Muslim heritage that guarded the Greek component intact during the middle ages, and Egypt's renaissance was re-ignited with the establishment of the modern nineteenth century state after the departure of the Napoleonic expedition (13).

The chapters of the book, that are rarely if ever discussed, present a lively and detailed picture of a rigorous plan to initiate an Egyptian educational system which would serve the intellectual needs of an independent state on both the national and international levels. Each chapter succinctly discusses a single issue and offers recommendations or solutions. Issues range from primary, secondary and university education to the final chapters on mass media and intellectual life outside schools and universities. In all chapters, Husayn is keen on accommodating his programme to the local and international scenes effecting a fusion

to the colonialist view of his world and longs to bridge what he sees as the gap between the opposite shores of the Mediterranean. He offers a reading of history that cites the political interests of the colonial powers as the reason behind this forced division that separates Egyptian civilization throughout its history from the civilization of the Greeks on the other side of the Mediterranean (8). In an interesting parallel that corroborates his theory of a cultural context that brings Egypt and the "west" together, Husayn refers to the similarities between Christianity and Islam in the context of Greek thought and culture:

Islam and Christianity came to resemble each other in another way. Christianity influenced and was influenced by Greek philosophy before the rise of Islam. Philosophy became Christian and Christianity became philosophical. The same thing happened when Islam came into contact with Greek philosophy. Philosophy became Muslim and Islam became philosophical. The history of the two faiths is one with respect to this phenomenon. Why does Christianity's association with philosophy make it one of the props of the European mind, while Islam's

already reached. Al-Shilq shows an understanding of Husayn's "western" tendencies in *Mustaqbal*: "Husayn attempted a resolution to the conflict between his love for the homeland and pain for its backwardness on the one hand, and admiration and animosity towards the west on the other" (290). Husayn's loyalty to his Arabo-Islamic heritage is emphasized by Al-Shilq in a series of evidence drawn from his post-*Mustaqbal* works that present views rooted in his patrimony. Husayn's study on Al-Ma'ari is critical of the poet's sole dependence on reason. *'Ala Hamish Al-Sira* addresses human needs other than those that rationalism gives rise to. More criticism to reason being the sole source for knowledge is voiced by Husayn in *Mir'at al-Islam*. In *Alwan*, Husayn sees social justice as an integral component of the early history of Islam in the first half century of Hijra, rather than a European model to be imitated. *Al-Fitna Al-Kubra* is a statement favouring the political system of the Caliphate in the era of Abu Bakr and Omar. Furthermore, in *Naqd wi Islah* Husayn himself refutes the common accusation of turning his back to his Arabo-Islamic identity in favour of a westernized model by citing his firm position in defence of Islam and the Arabo-Islamic civilization (291-293).

Husayn, thus, rejects the ossification of culture and the closed totality of knowledge. However he still conforms

Europeans, although occasional bewitched individuals and groups have done this very thing" (20).

Al-Maqalih rounds up his article by quoting a manuscript written by Mustafa Nassif, Husayn's student, who recalls a talk given by Taha Husayn in 1941. Husayn's audience as well as Nassif himself were surprised to listen to Husayn as he gave credit to Al-Azhar for his early academic formation. Al-Azhar was introduced as a university that stands on a par with French universities. Azharites had the freedom to attend the lessons they chose to follow motivated only by their love for learning. Sheikhs were broad-minded enough to accept differences in opinion, except the few instances recorded in his autobiography. Even when displaying cruelty, Al-Azhar sheikhs were sympathetic towards their students. Husayn also finds in the concluding remark "The Knowledge of God is greater" a reference to the ever-developing field of knowledge and the responsibility of the scholar before God (Al-Maqalih, 56-57).

In an article discussing Husayn's "westernization" charges, Ahmad Zakariya Al-Shilq deplors the vicious circle involving Arab thinkers who are busy rehashing the same discussions about modernity and enlightenment and are consequently unable to move forward from a point

charges of serving the Orientalist cause. In his article, "Difa' 'n Al-'ql wa Al-Damir Al-'rabiyyin: Taha Husayn wa Al-Shak 'ala Al-Tariqa Al-Azhariya" [Apology for Arab Reason and Conscience: Taha Husayn and Azhari Scepticism] he refers to Husayn's introduction to *Hadith Al-Arbi'* where he is critical of a generation of scholars whose fascination with the west alienated them away from their cultural roots (I, 13, quoted in Al-Maqalih, 52-54). He also deplores the ferocious campaign against Taha Husayn led by "islamist" critics being of the opinion that Husayn was in the first place an Azhari rebel in the tradition of Jamal el Din al-Afghani and Muahmmad 'Abdu. Furthermore, he sees his contribution as far as a critical reading of the Arab heritage is concerned, as an extension of the works of Ibn Sallam al-Jumhi, al-Jahiz, Abu Al-'la' Al-Ma'arri and Ibn Khaldun (46-47).

As a matter of fact, Husayn defends cultural roots as the basis for a modern national character. He keeps a critical distance though from both traditional and modern culture blaming a generation of scholars who display either a fanatic attachment to their heritage, or a superficial understanding of modernity: "I who have long argued that we stoutly protect our independence naturally do not advocate rejection of the past or loss of identity in the

don'ts. In such theories, it makes sense to talk of the transgressive power of symbolic hybrids to subvert categorical oppositions and hence to create the conditions for cultural reflexivity and change; it makes sense that hybrids are endowed with unique powers, good or evil, and that hybrid moments, spaces or objects are hedged in with elaborate rituals, and carefully guarded and separated from mundane reality.(1)

The position of Taha Husayn as a thinker who interacts with his society, shaping and being shaped by the lived experience is corroborated by his writings before *Mustaqbal Athaqafa*. His early iconoclasm, was not a borrowed western product, rather it showed in the traditional sphere of Al-Azhar, that was teeming with reformist trends after the model of Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh. His views on the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry, reached independently of Margulioth, have their roots in classical Arabic criticism. And when his Cartesian methodology offended a conservative society, he rewrote and reproduced his book in a new form: *Fi Aladab Aljahili* (1927).

'Abdel-^caziz Al-Maqalih refers to the Arabo-Islamic context of Husayn's contribution, clearing Husayn from the

anticipates Homi Bhabha's reference to the interstices of culture:

Political empowerment, and the enlargement of the multiculturalist cause, come from posing questions of solidarity and community from the interstitial perspective. Social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition; they are the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project – at once a vision and a construction – that takes you “beyond” your self in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction to the political *conditions* of the present. (3)

This hybrid perspective has recently been promoted by research in the field of cultural studies. Identity politics moved to the centre of a complex investigation. According to Pnina Werbner, hybridity is partly a significant factor on the modernist scene:

The power of cultural hybridity ... makes sense for modernist theories that ground sociality in ordered and systematic categories; theories that analyse society as if it were bounded and ‘structures’ by ethics, normative do’s and

Said goes back to Fanon to stress the need for “the emergence of a new intellectual and political consciousness” as an antidote to the excesses of nationalism (xxvii). Quoting Fanon, Said makes a point about a certain drawback in nationalist projects: “the violence of the colonial regime and counter-violence balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity” (*Wretched of the Earth* 88). Said thus recommends that “the struggle must be lifted to a new level of contest, a synthesis represented by a war of liberation, for which an entirely new post-nationalist theoretical culture is required” (323). Husayn’s theory of culture in his book may be viewed as the war of liberation Said referred to. He is in Said’s words shaping and being shaped by Egypt’s history and social experience.

Husayn’s theory of culture may even be better understood in the light of Homi Bhabha’s post-colonial approach that avoids binary division perpetrated by western powers and encourages instead a reading in the light of the interaction of culture in a hybrid fashion allowing for “a temporality that makes it possible to conceive of the articulation of antagonistic or contradictory elements” (*Location of Culture*, 25). He calls attention to the “agonistic space” (181) where cultures meet. (Wikipedia, Homi Bhabha). From his unique perspective, Husayn also

patient alternative, as a frankly exploratory possibility. (xxiv)

Consequently, Said concedes that "authors are [not] determined by ideology, class, or economic history, but authors are, I also believe, very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure" (xxiv).

It is, therefore, safe to assume that the binary division between East and West, privileging "western progress" had no place in Husayn's project. Rather, Taha Husayn's project looks forward to Said's later perceptive diagnosis in *Culture and Imperialism* :

Gone are the binary oppositions dear to the nationalist and imperialist enterprise. Instead we begin to sense that old authority cannot simply be replaced by new authority, but that new alignments made across borders , types, nations, and essences are rapidly coming into view, and it is those new alignments that now provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notions of *identity* that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism. (xxviii)

methods, and the like. As C.L.R. James used to say, Beethoven belongs as much to West Indians as he does to Germans, since his music is part of the human heritage. (xxvii)

Hybridity, therefore, sets the tone for his post-colonial view of the world:

Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic. This, I believe, is as true of the contemporary United States as it is of the modern Arab world, where in each instance respectively so much has been made of the dangers of 'un-Americanism' and the threats of 'Arabism'. Defensive, reactive, and even paranoid nationalism is, alas, frequently woven into the very fabric of education, where children as well as older students are taught to venerate and celebrate the uniqueness of their tradition (usually and invidiously at the expense of others). It is to such uncritical and unthinking forms of education and thought that this book is addressed – as a corrective, as a

Husayn's proposition that the intellectual life of Egypt is closer to the culture of the Mediterranean than it is to that of the Orient (Far East). Apart from the fact that such criticism limits itself to the first chapter and ignores the contribution the book brings to the field of the education in the form of an extended account and practical manual where education caters for native as well as universal needs, it is a critical view that rests on a theory of culture as a monolithic totality. To go back to Said, "Western Imperialism and third world nationalism feed each other, but even at their worst they are neither monolithic nor deterministic. Besides, culture is not monolithic either, and is not the exclusive property of East or West, nor of small groups of men or women" (xxvii).

The recourse to culture in the Arnoldian sense offers, according to Said, "a protective enclosure" to religious and nationalist intellectuals of formerly colonized nations (xiv). It is against this background that Said formulated his view based on the humanist tradition:

For the record, then, I have no patience with the position that 'we' should only or mainly be concerned with what is 'ours', any more than I can condone reactions to such a view that requires Arabs to read Arab books, use Arab

other side. This has enabled me in a sense to live on both sides, and to try to mediate between them (xxvi).

It is this sense that Said summed up as "intertwining histories, overlapping territories" in the title to his first chapter in *Culture and Imperialism* that eluded Husayn's detractors. Their position may be understood in what Said has to say about "culture in the Arnoldian sense" which according to him is "often aggressively connected with the nation or the stage; this differentiates 'us' from 'them', almost always with a degree of xenophobia" (xiii). Therefore, Said is of the view that

Culture in this sense is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that, as we see in recent 'returns' to culture and tradition. These 'returns' accompany rigorous codes of intellectual and moral behaviour that are opposed to the permissiveness associated with such relatively liberal prophecies as multiculturalism and hybridity. In the formerly colonized world, these 'returns' have produced varieties of religious and nationalist fundamentalism. (xiii-xiv)

The unfavourable reception of Husayn's theory of culture rests mainly on an indignant Arabo-Islamic rejection of

one. The task then is to describe it as pertaining to Indians *and* Britishers, Algerians *and* French, Westerners *and* Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and Australians despite the horrors, the bloodshed, and the vengeful bitterness. (xxiv)

A re-reading of *Mustaqbal* in the light of such development under the changing conditions of a post-modern world sheds new light on Husayn's views and methods, and establishes a link between his theory of culture and our present-day concerns as regards tradition and "western" culture. In such a context the very definition of culture and identity has been problematized. Homi Bhabha and the later Edward Said offer pertinent perspectives on the fluid and interstitial space where cultures meet and identity is negotiated. Said, in particular, offers an interesting parallel with Husayn as both looked beyond the divisions propagated by imperialist policy under the banner of "the white man's burden": Hussein bridged the gap between his early education in Al-Azhar and his intellectual formation in Paris, while Said records in *Culture and Imperialism*: "Although I feel at home in them [US, England and France], I have remained , as a native from the Arab and Muslim world, someone who also belongs to the

Furthermore, Husayn's early political affiliation to Al-Ahrar Al-Dusturiyin party made him stand away from passionate and essentialist views of patriotism and call Egyptians instead to rise to the standards of the occupier before claiming their full independence. An interesting precedent for this trend is revealed in Husayn's admiration of Greek thought in his early career. His translation of Aristotle's *Nizam al-Athiniyin* coincided with the 1922 declaration of Egypt's independence and its advent to a new era of democracy. (Ahmad Abdel Halim, 43).

Postcolonial theory, however, witnessed developments in the context of cultural studies. Said himself in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) and Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1993) offered a more developed view of the relationship between colonizer and colonized in terms of hybridity. The imperialist project managed as Said puts it "to bring the world together", though insidiously and unjustly

One of imperialism's achievements was to bring the world closer together and, although in the process the separation between Europeans and natives was insidious and fundamentally unjust one, most of us should now regard the historical experience of empire as a common

Egyptian "mind" to the same source from which Europeans developed their Renaissance, Husayn may be indirectly giving credence to Cromer's pseudo-scientific racial theory.

As a matter of fact both Husayn and his critics are victims of such colonialist views as Cromer's. On the one hand, Meijer's romanticists resorted to a rich heritage of a spiritual past that glorified Islamic civilization, while on the other, Husayn made an effort to link his homeland to the "west", both implicitly accepting the colonial division. A clear evidence of Husayn's failure to rid himself of the impact of colonialist ideas is his comment on Kipling's often quoted line:

We Egyptians must not assume the existence of intellectual differences , weak or strong, between the Europeans and ourselves or infer that the East mentioned by Kipling in his famous verse "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" applies to us in our country. Ismail's statement that Egypt is part of Europe should not be regarded as some kind of boast or exaggeration, since our country has always been part of Europe as far as intellectual and cultural life is concerned, in all its forms and branches. (9)

works. Even Said himself, though justified in diagnosing Husayn's effort to place Egyptian culture in a European context tends to oversimplify and stereotype Husayn's theory in the above quoted comment.

In the light of Said's analysis of the colonial division, Husayn may be viewed as eager to escape the negative category of the colonized and join the positive one of the colonizer. He may also be looked upon as engaging with concepts of racial superiority prevalent at the time when he introduces the controversial statement affiliating Egyptian culture to the Mediterranean rather than the Arabo-Islamic world. Cromer in *Modern Egypt* (1908) emphasizes the gap between colonizer and colonized along the dividing lines between "east" and "west". It is a gap that hinders communication because of "divergence of religion and habits of thought, ... the reticence of Orientals when speaking to any one in authority; their tendency to agree with any one to whom they may be talking; the want of mental symmetry and precision, which is the chief distinguishing feature between the picturesque East and the logical West, and which lends such peculiar interest to the study of Eastern life and politics; ... and the fact that the European and the Oriental, reasoning from the same premises, will often arrive at diametrically opposite conclusions" (7). Consequently, it is by attaching the

problematic nature of the relationship between the colonizing yet advanced “west”, simultaneously hated and admired, and the colonized and not so well advanced “east”, self-constructed as the location for resisting colonialism as well as for pride in its own heritage. It is the binary division disclosed by Said, earlier, in *Orientalism* as an example of triumphant Orientalist policies with particular reference to Husayn himself: “when Taha Hussein [sic.] said of modern Arab culture in 1936 [sic.] that it was European, not Eastern, he was registering the identity of the Egyptian cultural elite, of which he was so distinguished a member” (*Orientalism*, 323). Turning to modern times for further instances of his proposition and an exploration of the results of such division, Said refers to the power gap between the United States and Europe on the one hand, Arab and Islamic region on the other, in terms of “production of culture” resulting in “Oriental students (and Oriental professors) still want[ing] to come and sit at the feet of American Orientalists, and later to repeat to their local audiences the clichés [Said] has been characterizing as Orientalist dogmas” (*Orientalism* 323-4). It was this argument that fuelled criticism of Taha Husayn’s theory of culture in a manner that forcibly extracted the reference to the Greek connection from the context of the whole work, and equally extracted the whole work from the body of Taha Husayn’s

citizen in a modern society and that the relations of patronage associated with paternalism and dependence impair this process of emancipation" (13) does not conveniently qualify the cultural approach of Husayn marked with cultural hybridity. Furthermore, these attacks orchestrated by "reactionary modernists" ignored the book's general argument and detailed plan, proposed by Husayn with a view to reforming education and providing the basics for a national culture, and focused instead on few isolated aspects taken out of context, especially his proposition that Egyptian culture is rooted in the Mediterranean Hellenistic tradition. It is also to be noted that the controversy was partly aggravated and overshadowed by the earlier one about his use in *Fi Al-Shi'r Al-Jahili* (1926) of the methodology of Cartesian doubt to question the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry.² Husayn's opponents, understandably jealous of their Arab heritage and Islamic faith are relentless in their rejection of his propositions.

As a matter of fact, the controversy between Taha Husayn and his opponents is enacted against a background of a binary division shaped by Orientalist thought and ably presented by Said in *Orientalism*. Admittedly, Husayn fell victim to that same binary division advocated by colonialists at his time. Taha Husayn's reference to the Greek connection made his position vulnerable owing to the

But even with his assertion that the Arabic Language and Islam are cornerstones in the formation of the Egyptian identity and his view of Egypt as sharing this Arab-Islamic heritage with its Arab neighbours (20), Husayn was subjected to a fierce campaign of criticism led by figures representing the anti-western Islamist trend (Meier's "reactionary modernists") who viewed his proposal to look to Greece and the Hellenistic civilization as an act of betrayal. This critical trend was led Mustafa Sadiq Al-Rafi'i who denounced, from an Islamic point of view, Taha Husayn's "westernization" programme (ʿAwad). Many years later, after postcolonial studies established new readings of the discourse of the colonized peoples, Mona Abaza referred to both Husayn and his like-minded friend and contemporary Huysan Fawzi as "fervent advocates of Egypt's belonging to the Greco-Roman Mediterranean culture. By doing so, they perpetrated a Western Orientalist perception of an antithetical Orient" (20).

Adopting the tenets of postcolonial theory, the researcher contends that the feuds surrounding the book emanate from a misconception of the "modernist" label attached to the Egyptian intellectuals of the time. Meijer's view of Egyptian "modernists [who] were also aware that only an individual who has emancipated himself from the bonds of tradition can function as a full-blown, patriotic

above-mentioned ideologies ignited the feuds surrounding the publication of Husayn's *Mustaqbal*.

This paper, therefore, focuses on a re-evaluation of one of the most heated controversies initiated by Husayn's claim in *Mustaqbal* that the cultural heritage of Egypt went back to the Ancient Greeks rather than the civilizations of the Orient, referring to China and Japan (4-6). In an attempt to find a place for Egypt in the history and development of civilizations, Husayn proposes in his opening chapter a thesis that aligns the Egyptian mindset with the Mediterranean basin, especially Egypt's Hellenistic past and European civilization rather than the East (7-8). He also claims that Islam did not alter the intellectual character of Egypt, in the same way as Christianity did not alter the intellectual character of Europe (5-6). As for Egypt's relation to Arabs and Islam, Husayn points out to a common heritage of language and literature and draws the line between religious faith and a modernist Egyptian nation-state (20). Husayn's arguments have provided critics ever since the book was published with the impetus to a relentless and continuous attack not only on this view in particular but also on Husayn's religious convictions or the lack thereof.

Westernized system by adopting a radical nationalist and Islamist terminology of anti-Westernism. Though modernist, this current is in many ways comparable to the revolt of Romanticism against the rationalization of the Enlightenment and therefore should be designated as reactionary modernism. This way of thinking was represented by Young Egypt (1930) and the Muslim Brotherhood (1928). These organizations formulated their protests in a discourse of cultural authenticity and identity and emancipated themselves fully from the politics of patronage at the end of the 1930s, when they became political movements. ...On the other hand, a current appeared that adopted a program based on clear-cut political and social reform, couched in a secular discourse of emancipation and rationalization. The liberal reformist, socialist, and communist movements that took on the secular discourse of radical modernism aimed to deepen and expand the "liberal experiment". (21-22)

It is against this background that a re-assessment of Taha Husayn's theory of culture as expounded in his *Mustaqbal* needs to be discussed, especially as the clash between those

competing parties on the cultural scene of the time: "modernists" and "romanticists". To quote Meijer,

I use the term modernism for ideologies belonging to modernity during the period in European history that spans roughly from 1800 to 1950. Modernity is usually associated with industrialization, urbanization, the technological revolution, the rise of a mass society, the development of political ideologies, and the establishment of the nation-state. Modernists are those who accept modernity wholeheartedly, while we may say that romanticists react against modernity and try to contain it. In Egypt, modernism as an ideology belongs to the period between 1800 and 1970. In this period Egyptian intellectuals adopted many of the central tenets of modernism and modernity, including its conceptions of time, place, identity, society and the nation. (11)

Meijer defines two competing parties, both "modernist" yet each defines modernism in its own terms:

On the one hand, a current emerged that revolted against the existing elitist and

A comprehensive view of Husayn's theory of culture should not however be restricted to this single work and may be gleaned from the impressive and varied output of his numerous articles, studies and fiction published in half a century. This paper, limited in scope, aims rather at presenting a new reading of *Mustaqbal*, and examines other works by Husayn only as far as they present an integrated view of his programme. The researcher proposes this reading in the light of postcolonial theory with a view to offering a new perspective on the conflicting trends surrounding Husayn's work in general and *Mustaqbal* in particular. Resorting to postcolonial theory is necessary as Taha Husayn wrote his work at a critical point when Egypt was at least nominally declared an independent state and a search for identity was paramount. Husayn's contribution is offered at a time that heralds the beginning of the end of colonial empires and the flourishing of nationalist movements in previously colonized countries.

The thirties of the twentieth century was a period of turmoil in Egypt. Roel Meijer, in *The Quest for Modernity*, presents the widely-accepted view of a modernist Egypt in this decade trying to break free from the shackles of the past. His definition of modernism is of interest in this regard as it presents, in its sweeping strokes, a rationale for the clashing trends of reform adopted by the two major

The genesis of *Mustaqbal* is strongly linked to the social and political context in Egypt in the late thirties of the twentieth century. Culture, according to Taha Husayn, is the means to bolster the independence and freedom of nations. It is interesting to note that Husayn does not recognize the 1936 Treaty and the abolition of capitulations, both granting Egypt full sovereignty, as ends in themselves. Rather, on the very first page of *Mustaqbal* he emphasizes the necessity of constructing a culture that imparts power to and consolidates the newly won independence. To quote Husayn,

[W]e will sharpen our determination and strengthen our hopes for the future by reflecting on the triumph that climaxed the long and arduous struggle for independence, acknowledged by the civilized world in admitting us along with other free peoples in the League of Nations. Exult and hope we may, but not the exclusion of action. We must not stand before freedom and independence in contented admiration. Like all advanced nations, Egypt must regard them as a means of attaining perfection. (1)¹



Taha Husayn's Theory of Culture: A Re-assessment

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The relevance of Taha Husayn (1889 – 1973), university professor, man-of- letters, critic, *educationalist*, and politician to present times, cannot be over-estimated. His works still stand as a landmark in relation to the modernization of Egypt. Among his various achievements, he is credited with the formation of a theory of culture, set forth in *Mustaqbal Al-thaqafa fi Misr* (1938, referred to hereinafter as *Mustaqbal*). Husayn wrote his work for the explicit purpose of planning an educational and cultural programme that would be instrumental in the progress of a newly-independent Egypt after the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty in 1936, followed by the abolition of foreign capitulations in the Montreux conference in 1937.

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